

The Pope's Visit to Iraq: Indicators and Outcomes

Ahmed Sami Al-Mamouri

Director of Research and Development, Al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue

The first-ever Papal visit to Iraq on March 5-8, 2021 was largely met with celebration as he pursued a mission of solidarity with persecuted Christians and other minorities and sought to elevate a mission of tolerance and coexistence among Christians and Muslims in Iraq, the Middle East and around the globe. The trip was replete with symbolism from the historic meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, to an interfaith gathering in Ur, to prayer services amongst the ruins of Mosul, the reviving community of Qaraqosh, and high-level delegations in Baghdad and Erbil, and overwhelmingly positive receptions by crowds along the way.

Yet for the celebrations to translate into meaningful changes will require far more than symbolic gestures. The security situation remains fraught, justice for genocide survivors has been limited, meaningful political representation for all Iraqis is still in question, and the unequal economic opportunities and basic services have inspired waves of protests in recent months.

In this [Cornerstone Forum series](#), contributors were asked to consider: Does the Pope's visit provide an opportunity for meaningful steps to be taken? What practical steps could be taken to translate the goodwill of the Pope's visit into tangible progress in addressing the fundamental issues impacting Iraqis of all religious communities? What roles should international NGOs, religious actors, and multi-lateral organizations take to support positive developments for a more just and flourishing society?

هذا المقال متوفّر باللغة العربيّة: [زيارة البابا للعراق الدلالات والنتائج](#)

The visit of Pope Francis to Iraq represents an extraordinarily significant event in the lives of Iraqi people as it generated a state of joy, elation, and hope Iraq had not experienced for a long time. Yet, things quickly returned to the usual atmosphere as soon as the Pontiff left the Iraqi lands, after a few days-visit.

A hand grenade was thrown at the Shiite pilgrims heading to Imam al-Kadhim shrine in Baghdad, followed by the killing of the father of a civil activist, Ali Jaseb, who was kidnapped nearly a year and a half ago in the city of Amara, in southern Iraq, followed by the killing of a family of 8 near Tikrit, a city located north of Baghdad, all at the hands of ISIS terrorists. The question to be asked is how can the Pope's visit be translated into tangible benefits and how it can be broadened from the moral ground to the symbolic realm, and to a practical life that would benefit Iraq in a more substantial way to also encompass practical programs on the ground? I believe this could be achieved albeit

with putting more effort into it. The pontiff's visit could benefit Iraq in a variety of ways and can spread into several directions.

One of the important aspects for change is that the Iraqi government in particular, and the state in general, should institute a package of decisions, initiatives, and measures. From a constitutional legal point of view, even if the Constitution of the Republic of Iraq passed in 2005 includes a set of public rights and freedoms distinct from constitutions of other countries in the region, the absence of practical application of those principles creates an atmosphere which demonstrates lack of guarantees to the right of exercising those rights and freedoms to everyone. According to many human rights organizations, Iraq is not a free and fully democratic state. Therefore, the government and parliament must work together to ensure provision of legal guarantees for the exercise of these rights, and to ensure the fair and equal participation of all groups, sects, and minorities in society.

Effective governance must be pursued in areas such as legislating freedom of protest and expression, the law governing political parties, reviewing the quota system for minorities and women in the electoral system, seeking justice for those who have been subjected to violence and persecution by armed groups, and practical steps to bring the violators to justice, both nationally or internationally. There should be a review of personal status laws and family law, such as a review of civil marriage, the inheritance laws, as well as personal status relations of different religions, especially given the Iraqi constitution guaranteed Iraqis freedom in matters of their personal status.

Additionally it is critical to guarantee the rights of women and their participation along with men in all human and societal activities on an equal footing. This is what the Pope referred to when he dedicated a part of his speech in the Great Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh in the Nineveh Plains: "I would like to thank all mothers and women from the bottom of my heart. In this country, the courageous women who continue to give life despite the violations they face and the wounds inflicted on them. Let women be respected and let them be protected! Let them receive attention and given opportunities."

As far as the issue of the commercial environment and investment business, there should be openness towards real investment to attract foreign capital aspiring to invest in the field of pilgrimage and tourism in an effective manner and to encourage investment in religious and archaeological tourism in areas of religious presence such as Ur, Nineveh, Babylon, Maysan, Basra and other sites.

With regard to cultural issues, the Iraqi government must work with established foundations to strengthen the Abrahamic religious symbolism in the conscience of the nation, despite major differences and competition between the three religions, there are many commonalities and the relative and spiritual affiliation of the Prophet Abraham that could be encouraged and promoted, as it was the case in the Abrahamic initiative launched by the Pope in 2013 that resulted in the document on Fraternity he signed with the Sheikh of Al-Azhar in 2019. This symbolism can be translated by unifying the religious discourse of the clerics of three major religions, moving away from the approach of isolation and rejecting "the other." These figures are important for inspiring and activating the symbolism of the meeting between the Pope and Grand Ayatollah Sistani and the meeting between the representatives of the sects in praying with the Pope in Ur to become a reality in the collective mind of the peoples. Work should be done in order to change the educational

curricula in schools and universities and replace it with a new one that calls for coexistence, unity and common citizenship for the Iraqi nation. The Iraqi government should also work towards forming an international pressure group and campaign to get UNESCO's support for the monuments and places of worship in Mosul, Baghdad, Ur and dozens of other archaeological and religious sites.

It must also be pointed out, and this is a very important point, that the religious establishment in Iraq and decision-makers must benefit from the Pope's visit to Najaf, it is a great spiritual symbol that must be capitalized upon. At the national, international and regional level, the visit carried a message to the world that the Sayyid al-Sistani's declaration represents a moderate and not radical Islam. This was reflected by his reference to the importance of the nation's guardianship over itself, rather than affirming "the guardianship of the jurist" which is in line with the "theocratic theory of governance," or for that matter the theory of fundamentalist "Wahhabi Islam." There is a large area of common denominators that the two parties can benefit from, such as fighting terrorism, revealing violence, spreading the spirit of tolerance and peace, and working to ensure that all the peoples of the persecuted region live in peace, safety and reassurance. This is precisely what Grand Ayatollah Sistani referred to when he mentioned the peoples of the region, and the Palestinian people in particular. Finally, one may ask, how can all these measures and efforts be achieved in a country deeply entangled in ethnic and sectarian divisions, that suffers from economic crisis and that is ravaged by corruption, in the absence of a single national identity.

I think that the solution is to work on building a new national identity for Iraq to help shape a one nation with multiple components, ethnicities and sects.

The visit of the Pope provided an opportunity for the Iraqi national, religious, political and social elites, to draw on the visit in order to bolster and mobilize regional and global public opinion to stand with Iraq, and to help it solve its problems and to promote unity and common citizenship, and struggle to shape a new national identity for the country according to what we call "citizenship of the Iraqi nation." First, we must present ourselves to the world as a nation that respects human rights and freedoms in harmony with the free world. This matter indeed requires reshaping the Iraqi state, or to say "reconstructing the Iraqi nation anew" according to the foundations of a new citizenship. The Iraq which will be is not a state based on sectarianism and components and ethnicities, but a nation which brings together all of these commonalities.

If contemporary democracies were born from the womb of the idea of a social contract between the people and the ruler in which the people gave up part of their powers to the ruler in order to rid the people of chaos and rivalry, then I think that this idea cannot be applied to the Iraqi people now, because the contract requires that both the ruler and the people be "one." As it stands the Iraqi people are unable to manage their affairs by themselves and therefore their role will not be real in political participation, whether by holding elections or otherwise, while the ruler is "the other," without a will and capacity or whereby a ruler is clinging to power and deceiving the people wearing a false religious, sectarian or ethnic dress. The strange thing is that the view of the religious parties is commensurate with this problem, whether they know it or not. Hence whoever believes in the "supremacy of the cleric" and his "guardianship over the people," assuming the ruler thinks about the people and leads the state on behalf of the people. He is elected instead of the people, governs on behalf of the people, exercises opposition on behalf of the people, and possesses the will of the

people, for their present and their future. This is exactly the problem that we raise by pointing out that the Iraqi people currently do not have the capacity and the will to manage their own affairs by themselves, meaning that the leadership of the cleric complicates and aggravates the situation and does not solve the problem.

The solution will be through a re-negotiation of the relationship between the people and the ruler, in which the people will have the ability to manage the political process in Iraq through a strategic international project led by the free liberal world, so that the people are able to lead themselves by themselves and reduce the ruler's powers, little by little, in order to walk and lead the nation. With the consolidation of idea of citizenship for the Iraqi nation in the conscience of the people, and this is what we find many peoples in the region desire, as the peoples are keen to evaluate the ruler's work and hold him accountable, if he makes mistakes, and protect him and stand in support of him if he fulfill the hopes of the nation, as is the experience of Sheikh Zayed during his rule in the Emirates, as well as the experience of the Turkish people during the attempted military coup in 2016, the people took to the streets to defend the democratic experiment from chaos and protect the new Turkey, before even protecting Erdogan himself.

The same goes with many civilized countries of the world whose people have become the safety valve of control, checking corruption and ensuring orderly departure of the ruler from the path of the nation before any constitutional or other legal guarantee. This is in congruence with the theory of "the nation's guardianship over itself" which Sistani believes in and this is a very great source of strength, if it is properly implemented.

Ahmed Sami Al-Mamouri is Director of Research and Development at Al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue and Professor of Law and Dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Kufa. He is Chief of the Scientific Council for the Kufa Journal of Legal and Political Sciences and Chairman of the Central Human Rights Committee at the University of Kufa. He holds a PhD in Law from the University of Baghdad.

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Religious Freedom Institute
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.838.7734 | rfi.org